

University of Wollongong

Research Online

Faculty of Science, Medicine and Health -
Papers: part A

Faculty of Science, Medicine and Health

2014

Gendered risk engagement: challenging the embedded vulnerability, social norms and power relations in conventional Australian bushfire education

Christine Eriksen

University of Wollongong, ceriksen@uow.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/smhpapers>



Part of the [Medicine and Health Sciences Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Eriksen, Christine, "Gendered risk engagement: challenging the embedded vulnerability, social norms and power relations in conventional Australian bushfire education" (2014). *Faculty of Science, Medicine and Health - Papers: part A*. 1442.
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/smhpapers/1442>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Gendered risk engagement: challenging the embedded vulnerability, social norms and power relations in conventional Australian bushfire education

Abstract

Building on an identified need for gender-sensitive approaches to bushfire risk engagement, this paper examines outreach initiatives specifically targeting women's bushfire awareness and preparedness in southeast Australia. The results of an online survey, together with two workshops with community engagement staff and volunteers from rural fire services, convey perceived aids and obstacles for engaging women. Efforts at engaging women with bushfire risk management are shown to align squarely with efforts to create a more gender-balanced and gender-sensitive environment for bushfire brigade volunteers. The paper demonstrates how gender roles and gendered norms are reinforced by the patriarchal structures that shape everyday life and the on-the-ground application of official outreach policy and practice. This, in turn, results in heightened dimensions of gendered vulnerability to bushfire. Three key pointers to more successful engagement emerge from the analysis: the benefits of hands-on experience and practice, the strength of networks and the imperative of supportive learning environments.

Disciplines

Medicine and Health Sciences | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details

Eriksen, C. (2014). Gendered risk engagement: challenging the embedded vulnerability, social norms and power relations in conventional Australian bushfire education. *Geographical Research*, 52 (1), 23-33.

Gendered Risk Engagement: Challenging the Embedded Vulnerability, Social Norms and Power Relations in Conventional Australian Bushfire Education

Abstract

Building on an identified need for gender-sensitive approaches to bushfire risk engagement, this paper examines outreach initiatives specifically targeting women's bushfire awareness and preparedness in southeast Australia. The results of an online survey, together with two workshops with community engagement staff and volunteers from rural fire services, convey perceived aids and obstacles for engaging women. Efforts at engaging women with bushfire risk management are shown to align squarely with efforts to create a more gender-balanced and gender-sensitive environment for bushfire brigade volunteers. The paper demonstrates how gender roles and gendered norms are reinforced by the patriarchal structures that shape everyday life and the on-the-ground application of official outreach policy and practice. This, in turn, results in heightened dimensions of gendered vulnerability to bushfire. Three key pointers to more successful engagement emerge from the analysis: the benefits of hands-on experience and practice, the strength of networks, and the imperative of supportive learning environments.

KEY WORDS *bushfire (wildfire); gender; women; risk engagement; resilience; vulnerability; Australia*

Introduction

In a journal article in 2010 (Eriksen et al. 2010), colleagues and I highlighted the

1 growing awareness within both academia and emergency services on the impact of
2 gendered norms on sustaining memberships of volunteer bushfire brigades and the
3 importance of gender relations within families in dealing with bushfires. This awareness
4 has to date rarely guided official bushfire management policy and practice. Nor has it
5 led to the widespread development of gender-sensitive community engagement
6 programs targeting an increasingly diverse set of people living and working in bushfire-
7 prone areas. This trend is echoed in Elaine Enarson's (2012, 108) observations from the
8 USA, which concluded that 'Currently, gender-sensitive risk communication is as
9 useful as it is rare, despite growing evidence of gender-specific risk and gender
10 differences in willingness to plan for emergencies'. The conventional patriarchal
11 structures of emergency services instead ensure that the primary focus, support and
12 funding of training programs goes to operational response rather than addressing
13 community attitudes to, for example, bushfire (Beatson and McLennan, 2005; Beatson
14 et al., 2008). In 2008 the Tasmania Fire Service (TFS) could have tripled its community
15 education budget by reducing its expenditure for fire truck replacement by two percent,
16 and the South Australian Country Fire Service's (SA CFS) annual community education
17 budget was equivalent to two and a half fire fighting trucks (Rhodes, 2008). Di Delaine
18 and colleagues (2008) emphasise that such prioritisation is reinforced politically as
19 outcomes of gender-sensitive community education programs are less tangible than
20 operational responses.

21 Part of the problem lies in the competing meanings of the term 'gender' and how it
22 invokes a diverse array of feelings depending on how it is understood in any given
23 context. 'Gender' has been accused of having become a 'catch-all term ... shorthand for
24 which the longhand has either been forgotten or was never really that clear in the first
25 place' (Cornwall 2007, 70). This results in misunderstandings identified as a key barrier

1 to gender analysis in disaster research and theory. One such misunderstanding is the
2 way in which 'gender' often is perceived as a shorthand term for 'women'. This
3 obscures that 'the tightly interwoven cultural and generational patterns that position
4 women differently before, during, and after disasters are just as real for boys and men'
5 (Enarson 2012, 24). In this paper, 'gender' is understood as a social construct not to be
6 confused with the biologically given definition of 'sex'.

7 Power is a key driving force of gender – relational and contextual – because 'gender
8 always has a class, a race, an age dimension, and a cultural context, intersecting all
9 other power structures' (Enarson 2012, 24; see also White 2000). Gender is therefore
10 inherently political as these are not just culturally defined boundaries but also social
11 inequalities that shape social meaning. This is one of the key reasons why gendered
12 axes of analysis in disaster research have such scope and value. Integral to any in-depth
13 understanding of how the relational dynamics of power among, as well as between,
14 women and men play out in the context of bushfire is the concept of 'hegemonic
15 masculinity'. Like the concept of 'gender', hegemonic masculinity is relational and
16 contextual. It is constructed discursively through specific practices at local, regional and
17 global levels. The concept refers to the social dominance of hegemonic forms of
18 masculinity over all forms of femininity as well as subordinated (non-hegemonic)
19 masculinities – usually through the interlocking of traditions and legitimacy. It
20 'embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy,
21 which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the
22 subordination of women' (Connell 2005, 77). This hierarchy of gender relations is a
23 pattern of hegemony rather than a pattern of dominance purely by coercive force
24 (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). It revolves around cultural consent, discursive
25 centrality, institutionalisation, and the subordination and marginalization of alternatives.

1 This, in part, explains why the many advances for women worldwide during the past
2 five decades have been uneven and why 'prejudice and sexism remain firmly embedded
3 in social structures' (Fordham 2004, 178) albeit often latent or disguised in equal
4 opportunity policies. As Deborah Eade (1999, 8) highlights, 'Even when stated policy
5 appears gender aware, institutions reproduce the prevailing values of society more often
6 than they challenge them, and the power dynamics in mixed settings are generally
7 disadvantageous to women'. Connell (2008) and Acker (1991) argue that studying
8 institutions is a vital step in the general understanding of men and masculinities as well
9 as women and femininities because most institutions are gendered, with internal gender
10 regimes that function in a wider context of gender relations, all of which produce gender
11 effects:

12 [Gender regimes] are complex structures involving gender divisions of labour,
13 gender relations of power, gender patterns of emotional relations, and gendered
14 culture. ... Without even being named as gender, a socially-defined masculinity
15 may be built in to the very concept of management or organizational rationality.
16 (Connell 2008, 242)

17 The ways in which gender regimes are firmly embedded in social structures is reflected
18 in the persistence of gender order within the patriarchal structures of fire fighting
19 agencies (Eriksen, In press). This is linked to the visible and invisible resistance to
20 change encountered not only amongst many male firefighters but also by 'the system'.
21 Women have been welcomed into the ranks of volunteer and paid fire fighting to date,
22 but their inclusion has usually been on the proviso that they meet the perceived non-
23 emotional, no-nonsense, non-compromising masculine way of engaging with risk
24 (Desmond 2007; Childs *et al.* 2004; Yarnal *et al.* 2004).

25 Thus the New South Wales Rural Fire Service (NSW RFS, 2011) released a glossy

brochure in connection with the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day on March 8th 2011 celebrating women in the service. The drive behind the brochure was twofold: to retain existing female volunteers and to recruit women considering volunteering for the service. Women currently constitute 21% of the 68,396 'operational' RFS volunteers, which includes fire fighters, team members, crew leaders, team leaders and officers (personal communication, NSW RFS Corporate Planning, Research & Governance Group, 2012). Women hold 7% of crew leader, team leader and officer positions, and constitute 22% of fire fighters and team members. Two percent of all brigade captains and 4% of Deputy Captains are currently women. The 1,850 'non-operational' volunteers, who fulfil roles such as communications and catering, are 40% women. At the salaried end of the scale, women fill 32% of a total of 969 staff positions. This gendered division of both membership numbers and roles reflects the continual reliance on patriarchal structures for the control of both technology and nature (Bryant and Pini 2010; Beatson and McLennan 2005; McLennan and Birch 2005; Little 2002). Just as the marginalisation of emotion has been part of a gender politics of research, which Kay Anderson and Susan Smith (2001) link to the gendered basis of knowledge production, so has critical engagement with the role and place of emotions – and thus women – in fire fighting been suppressed. Instead 'detachment, objectivity and rationality have been valued, and implicitly masculinised, while engagement, subjectivity, passion and desire have been devalued, and frequently feminised' (Anderson and Smith 2001, 7).

Hegemonic masculinity also enables the cultural values and practices of men to be disseminated in everyday life in such a way that they become unquestioned. Research has shown how the normalisation of patriarchal relations through discursive practices is legitimised through the media (Agg and Phillips 1998; Liepens 2000), while

institutional patriarchal structures resistant to change reinforce them (Alston 2005; Klenke 2011). Hierarchical social gender orders and patterns of hegemony are consequently reinforced by the everyday actions of both men and women.

This paper examines a particular form of gender-sensitive community engagement, namely outreach initiatives specifically targeting women's bushfire awareness and preparedness in southeast Australia. It is informed by an intersectional perspective increasingly popular in cultural geography and gender studies (e.g. Bryant and Pini 2010) in which gender, age, disability, class and ethnicity are seen as intersecting in various ways and to varying degrees in the everyday to form a complex web around women's and men's tolerance of and engagement with seasonal risks, such as bushfire. The strengths and weaknesses of current community education initiatives for engaging women are examined through the eyes of bushfire risk educators in southeast Australia. The results of an online survey, together with two workshops with community engagement staff and volunteers from rural fire services, convey perceived aids and obstacles for engaging women. The narratives of workshop participants' lived experiences are interwoven into the analysis to contextualise potential steps towards more gender sensitive outreach initiatives.

Methods

During the months of May and June 2011, 26 women and 18 men completed an online survey titled 'Engaging Women with Bushfire Safety Issues'. The 44 survey respondents all form part of the NSW RFS Community Engagement Unit, in the form of community engagement volunteers (18%), paid community safety officers (54.5%), paid fire mitigation officers (23%) or in a risk or development capacity (4.5%). They span a multiple of districts within all four regions (north, south, east and west) into

1 which New South Wales is divided for fire fighting purposes. The main (and in many
2 cases multiple) characteristics used by the survey participants to describe their districts
3 range from the rural-urban interface (areas with a rural history, circled as a descriptor by
4 61% of respondents), rural areas (49%), the wildland-urban interface (areas bordering
5 naturally vegetated land, 49%) or suburban landscapes (30%). The majority of districts
6 had experienced a major bushfire within the last five years (61%) compared to 32%
7 within the last six to ten years. Five percent had an eleven to fifteen year lapse and the
8 remaining 2% had not experienced a major bushfire for over twenty years.

9 The survey consisted of 21 questions covering topics such as perceived effectiveness
10 of different outreach initiatives, reasons preventing women from getting involved with
11 bushfire safety issues, skills needed, strength and weaknesses of local brigades for
12 engaging women. It was created as an online survey via SurveyMonkey.com and
13 distributed state-wide by the RFS Community Engagement Manager via e-mail. To
14 uphold organisational third-party confidentiality rights the number of recipients who
15 received an e-invitation to participate in the survey is unknown. A total response rate
16 can therefore not be calculated. Pearson's chi-squared test of contingencies (Bryman
17 2008) was used to evaluate whether survey components, such as levels of engagement
18 experience, time since last fire, perceptions of effectiveness and risk ratings, were
19 related to gender (for more details of the statistical approach used in SPSS, see Allen
20 and Bennett 2008).

21 The two workshops (focus groups) were initiated and facilitated by the author as part
22 of a larger research project on bushfire resilience (Eriksen, In press) and held as part of
23 the Australasian Community Engagement & Fire Awareness Conference hosted by the
24 NSW RFS in Wollongong in May 2011. All conference attendees were invited to attend
25 the workshops to share successes and obstacles to engaging women with bushfire safety

issues. A total of 58 people – 54 women and 4 men (community engagement, fire fighting and head office staff and volunteers), attended the two workshops, which lasted for 45 and 75 minutes respectively. Most attendees were from New South Wales although participants also represented Victoria (VIC), South Australia (SA), Tasmania (TAS) and Western Australia (WA). Audio recordings were made of the workshop discussions, which were transcribed verbatim before thematic coding and narrative analysis were undertaken in NVivo v9 (Bazeley 2007).

Perceptions of outreach effectiveness and disengagement factors

Survey participants rated the effectiveness of different outreach initiatives for engaging women on a five-point scale from very effective to no effect (Figure 1). Across the respondents there was agreement that the most effective outreach initiatives are face-to-face consultation on private properties and training courses (rated effective to very effective by 80% and 46% of respondents respectively). At the other end of the scale, brigade open days and media advertising in newspapers were rated as having no to low effect by 64% and 59% of respondents respectively.

A statistically significant gender difference was recorded between perceived effectiveness of field days/workshops (X^2 (2, N=42) = 9.833, $p < .007$), public events (X^2 (2, N=41) = 7.379, $p < .025$), and brigade open days (X^2 (2, N=42) = 6.638, $p < .036$).

Women were more favourably disposed than men towards each of these types of outreach initiatives. Fifty-six percent of women rated field days and workshops as effective to very effective whereas only 16% considered them to have no or low effect. Fifty-three percent of men, on the other hand, considered field days and workshops to have no to low effect with only 12% giving them top scores. Public events were perceived as having no to low effect by 65% of men and 29% of women whilst no men

and 25% of women consider public events as being effective or very effective. Brigade open days were rated no to low effect by 52% of women and 88% of men compared with 20% of women and no men giving them top scores.

Figure 1. Perceived effectiveness of different outreach initiatives for engaging women with bushfire safety issues, by gender and rating average across genders.

These perspectives on what does and does not work when reaching out to women about bushfire safety issues correlate with the reasons seen as preventing women from getting involved in the first place (Figure 2). There was such strong agreement across both genders on these views (i.e. no statistical significant difference was detected) that the data in Figure 2 has not been gender-disaggregated. The emphasis on face-to-face engagement ties in with the 78% of respondents who agree or strongly agree that a reliance on someone providing timely advice, warning and rescue (be it husbands, neighbours, friends or agency personnel) is stopping women from taking and being in control of their own bushfire safety (compared with 8% who disagreed). This was closely followed by lack of time due to other commitments (79%), perceptions of bushfire management as “men’s business” (74%), uncertainty of how to get involved (73%), and lack of belief in personal capacity to act (71%) as the main reasons discouraging women. Only perceptions of wilful ignorance and intimidating language and attitudes within local brigades divided survey participants. Thirty-two percent agreed or strongly agreed that wilful ignorance is an issue among women, 29% disagreed or strongly disagreed, whilst 39% chose to sit on the fence with a neutral stance. There were some inconsistency between women and men regarding the view that women find the language and attitudes of local brigade members intimidating¹.

1 More men (40%) than women (4%) strongly agreed with this statement. The majority of
2 women agreed (52% compared with 33% of men), while 30% of women and 13% of
3 men remain neutral, and 13% of both women and men disagree or strongly disagree.

4
5 Figure 2. Perceptions of factors that prevent women from engaging with bushfire safety
6 issues.

7
8 More than a third of survey respondents (39%) had had to tackle such gender-
9 specific issues that were brought to them by brigade volunteers (the ways in which these
10 factors play out in everyday life is described by, for example, Prior and Eriksen, 2012;
11 Eriksen and Gill, 2010; Maleta, 2009; Proudley, 2008). A frequent concern revolves
12 around women being at home alone during a fire, often with children. How best to
13 target specific groups, by whom and with what information are also questions often
14 asked. For example, what is the difference between men teaching women versus women
15 teaching women or women teaching men? Do you teach stay-at-home mothers how to
16 defend or do you just tell them to leave early? Others had much more overt gender
17 discrimination to deal with in the form of specific brigades stating outright that women
18 are neither welcome nor capable as volunteers.

19 Despite the many issues raised, only 27% of survey participants knew of bushfire
20 brigades within their district that currently run initiatives that specifically target
21 women's bushfire preparedness. The following section discusses some of the key
22 reasons why gender-sensitivity continues to be sidelined in bushfire risk engagement
23 programs. A section that examines the key lessons learnt from the gendered initiatives
24 already implemented follows this discussion.

Perceived needs for a changed culture of engagement

While the perceived degree to which gender matters in bushfire engagement differs (as demonstrated in Figures 1 and 2), research participants in general saw gender equity and age diversity as core strengths that individual bushfire brigades should aim to achieve. Such diversity was highlighted as being conducive to an environment that is both more community minded and better capable of supporting community members with diverse backgrounds, age groups and gender needs. One female workshop participant, for example, emphasised how “giving women a go” can dispel misconceptions about past practices of male-dominated rural communities:

The talk of the day was that a lot of women didn’t go to training because the men didn’t give them a go. They found that the women’s training day was sensational.

The only men that were there were the trainers, there were four of them and I think there were about twenty women. But the next step is to bring the women from the outlying district in to see that they’re capable of doing it. It’s not a man’s world. Our men don’t drag their knuckles anymore, like not in our brigade and our surrounding area, our men are really great with the women.

Age, however, was also identified as a core obstacle preventing local brigades from engaging more women. Research participants often linked age to a culture of male “old-timers” (or “silverbacks”) with set views and operating styles or conversely an overwhelming “macho attitude of younger members” (described in more detail in Eriksen, In press). This emphasis on men of certain age-groups and intimidating male language and attitudes match the findings of the 2007 NSW Rural Fire Service Volunteer Survey (Birch et al., 2008, 7), which concluded that ‘...unacceptable

behaviour and attitudes are sufficiently common in the RFS to induce most respondents, and particularly women, to wish for remedial action'. Sixty percent of respondents in Birch et al.'s (2008, 8) study thought that a RFS reputation as 'too much of a boy's club' was a deterrent to volunteering (with 30% considering it not to be a deterrent). Women were more likely to endorse this view than men, which was found to be consistent with the greater number of women who strongly agreed (40% compared with 25% of men) that the organisation would benefit from education, training or information regarding bullying, harassment and discrimination (ibid).

The need for a 'culture change' from the grass-roots level of volunteer brigades to the upper echelons of head office staff was highlighted by many research participants in my study as being paramount for a more gender-balanced and gender-just engagement approach. Many female survey and workshop participants felt fellow male brigade members devalued their efforts at community engagement. A workshop participant told how her male brigade captain viewed her as a "pamphlet chucker". Another participant felt that "at the brigade level it is sometimes hard to convince the boys that putting the wet stuff on the red stuff is not the most important thing." Many described how men are more often uncomfortable dealing with the emotions that can arise when engaging with community members, as conveyed by this female workshop participant:

Every fireman loves a good fire, they want to get on that big red truck and go out there and do their thing and they're fantastic, they're great, they do a brilliant job. But when it comes back to going and talking to the community about fires or about what they might want to do to work with the brigade, they find it really quite difficult. How to present the information in a non finger-pointing manner. How to deal with a number of people in the bush region who love the bush and don't ever want to see a

1 fire lit there. Well, nobody's going to light a fire unless it's needed but *he* can't stop
2 it if it comes through. So you know, there are a lot of levels that the guys don't really
3 want to get involved in. It can be confrontational.

4
5 However, some survey participants also pointed out that gender imbalance is a two-way
6 street with the increasingly female-dominated Community Engagement Unit of the
7 NSW RFS having the potential to cause gender biases towards men. This raises the
8 important point of 'engaging with men as agents of change rather than barriers to
9 change', which Mishra (2009, 37) emphasises as the only effective way to 'push
10 conventional boundaries' and ensure a lasting culture change (see also Fordham, 2004).

11
12 **Lessons learnt: Three key pointers to more successful engagement with women**

13 When asked what essential skills and knowledge are needed in order to make informed
14 decisions about bushfire safety, the majority of survey answers revolved around the
15 need to understand basic facts, knowledge of local history, geography and roads,
16 confidence in ability to act, and the necessity of being well-prepared. Key words that
17 emerged out of a word frequency count of this open-ended survey question were:
18 'knowledge', 'how', 'understand', 'what', 'preparation', 'leave', 'property', 'plan',
19 'where', 'family', 'do', 'information' and 'when'. These keywords paint a picture of the
20 need for detailed planning at the household level in order to know when, why, how,
21 where and what to do when a bushfire threatens. Assisting householders to adequately
22 plan and prepare can be challenging in the context of the obstacles encountered within
23 the institutional and everyday contexts discussed above. However, many lessons have
24 been learnt that provide guidance and suggest ways forward for engaging women with
25 bushfire safety issues. While there is variety in the characteristics and ingenuity of the

local engagement initiatives used within New South Wales and interstate, there are also many recurrent themes and strategies in the success stories shared by community engagement staff and volunteers.

In particular, three key pointers to successful engagement emerge from the survey and workshops: the benefits of hands-on experience and practice, the strength of networks, and the imperative of supportive learning environments. The ways in which workshop participants have successfully used these strategies to engage women across different life stages and lifestyles are highlighted in the textboxes below.

The benefits of hands-on experience and practice

Textbox 1. Examples of why hands-on experience and practice are important.

This young mother said to me, “I don’t have a kit with all this stuff in, but my six year old said to me the other day out of the blue, “Mum, if ever there is a bushfire, just take my top drawer”.” Right, and she looked in this top drawer and his ninja cards, all his teddies. Not on display, not on display at all, it's in his top drawer because, “Mum, if anything happens, just take my top drawer.” And you know, for her to realise that her son’s really interested in this, well then that becomes, you know, it promotes her to become interested. And she said, “Well, now I have to make a kit as well.” (female workshop participant)

I don’t mean any offence to anybody who’s in the towns but a lot of these ladies are from the city and this is very much not the butt end of the earth but, you know. So some of them didn’t know what an ember was. You know, you’ve got to break it down. You don’t think that’s jargon but it apparently was to them. (female workshop participant)

A lot of them [elderly residents] don’t have family near there and that was sort of an issue for them. “Who do I tell that I’m leaving?” So we try to get them to have a list so they don’t panic – have the phone numbers actually in front of them, things like that, at their phone. And that if their neighbour popped over, you’ve left a note, “I’ve gone to so and so” because that was a bit of an issue that family were ringing and putting people in panic when they were fine. (female workshop participant)

See also quote on page 11.

- 1
- 2 Research participants emphasised the benefits of giving women the opportunity to learn
- 3 hands-on, in person, while having the opportunity to voice questions and concerns in a
- 4 safe and supportive environment. The examples in Textbox 1, for example, explain why
- 5 a focus on the agency of children and parents is important, as priorities, drivers of
- 6 motivation and resilience levels change with lifestyle choices or parenthood. The same
- 7 notion of empowerment through knowledge applies to elderly people, as the retirement
- 8 age prompts changes in priorities while vulnerability levels shift.
- 9
- 10 *The strength of networks*

Textbox 2. Examples of the strength of networks for engaging women.

We run sessions with the local kindergarten in April and November and the only way that the kinder kids can come to our second session is if they bring a parent. So we have the children for an hour that the parents sit in on. Then they go out and squirt water and we give the parents a cuppa and do an early child safe program. We discuss [fire safety] and we also, even kinder kiddies, we also say to the parents, include them by giving them a job. Make sure that as families, every child in the family has a job to do in that plan, so they know they are fully involved. (female workshop participant)

We have about 10 remote location schools in really bizarre places. ... When we do our school program, the fire service get us to target year three's and we found that really advantageous because they are at that age where they are really switched on to those sorts of things. We send them home with the bushfire survival plan and we say we will come back and see how they got on with it. That motivates them to take it home to their families and work through the plan. We are trying to help them develop a concept of where they live, so that if they need to ring up 000, they can actually explain where they live. (female workshop participant)

I run a cadets brigade and just through the cadets coming, the parents who are non-RFS parents are getting exposure to the RFS and we have had a couple, and in particular the mothers, join the RFS and become firefighters or caterers. They come and ask us questions and because their kids are learning basic fire fighting, they are able to reinforce that at home. The awareness of the parents has now grown too and so it's a reverse affect. (female workshop participant)

CWA invited us to come down and do a talk at a nursing home about fire awareness. They're sort of on the edge of town and it's more of an ember type attack situation for them. They didn't really realise that they could be a victim or a part of it. Most of them were 80 to 90 year old ladies and they wanted to know how they could still be independent. You know, they didn't want to be talked at. They wanted tools. [Christine: Did you integrate in your delivery information about the AIDER² program?] Yes we did and they were really shocked that that even existed so we took quite a lot of pamphlets because that age group have time and you can't take everything in at once. But they really appreciated taking home pamphlets. (female workshop participant)

We had a really wonderful opportunity up north, [the area health service] decided to make bushfires part of a component of their accreditation. I had to go and talk to area health nurses or nurses from the hospitals. It was a really good way of contacting women that were living in the country and targeting them by speaking to area health nurses that knew of isolated elderly women who were in communities that could be forgotten about if a fire came through. (female workshop participant)

- 1
- 2 The examples in Textbox 2 highlight the ways in which network cells, such as schools,
- 3 kindergartens, nursing homes or health services can act as a vehicle for engaging
- 4 women. Other initiatives range from approaching mothers groups, books clubs, Country
- 5 Women's Association (CWA) meetings, and organising morning tea at a local property,
- 6 to women-only training days and fire cadets programs. These avenues of engagement
- 7 are seen as successful for a number of reasons. Similar to the examples provided in
- 8 Textboxes 1 and 3, they enable women to talk to other women in a 'safe' everyday
- 9 environment. Women are allowed to absorb information through open discussion. They
- 10 involve and empower children through take-home messages to the family. Most of all,
- 11 these networks of engagement encourage women to take ownership of knowledge and
- 12 thus create a sense of capability and responsibility. Time has shown many of the
- 13 workshop participants the strength in community cohesion and the creation of networks
- 14 within neighbourhoods, amongst peers, across local councils and different organisations

- 1 has therefore become an outreach imperative for facilitating women's engagement with
- 2 and management of bushfire safety issues.

3

4 *The imperative of supportive learning environments*

Textbox 3. Examples of the affect of supporting learning environments.

There is this little town, this was a few years ago, where all the men went to work and they had these fires. They then went to playgroups and everything like that and got the message out there and they [the women] all met at this lady's house and had a cup of tea. And someone said "Oh okay, we'll do our fire fighting training", "we'll do our community extra", "oh Mary doesn't want to do that but she'll mind the kids". So if you get a fire call we've got somewhere we can take the kiddies. It worked out as a group and it just worked out fantastic. They've got a ladies fire fighting unit for the day, the men at night, and weekends [women and men] together.

(female workshop participant)

I think the challenge is the mothers a lot of the time. This one women has got an eight, nine and 10 year old and I was talking about fire risk, "So what happens if you can't leave" and going through the options. She said, "Hang on a minute; I just have to leave the room. I don't discuss it in front of my kids. I don't think they need to be put through that stress". I think it's just so important to dispel these myths and empower this woman by telling her the sort of things that you can do to make it less stressful. These kids, in my belief, are old enough to know these sorts of things. (female workshop participant)

I had this experience with the 1800 number with the fire we had in 2006. We had a lot of calls from young women who said, "I was always going to stay, but I have got a three month-old baby." So this change in lifecycle is really a critical thing, where their own assumptions can suddenly be confronted and they hadn't had a chance to think it through. (female workshop participant)

A problem I come across is people who had decided that they were going to stay. They were always going to stay because they are the older generation. They are now realising that they are becoming more frail. Helping them confront that decision: "Will I be able to stay? Do I have to go?" Understanding that maybe the son or son-in-law or whatever won't be able to get through to them. (female workshop participant)

5

As evident in Textbox 3, workshop participants stressed the importance of creating a safe and supportive environment in which to engage women. Piggybacking on other events or institutional set-ups (such as the examples in Textbox 2) provides a shortcut to wider networks, creates multiple anchor points to negate suspicion towards council or NSW RFS representatives, and helps create a less intense learning environment as bushfire is but one of many topics discussed. A safe environment could also be all it takes to dispel misconceptions about fire behaviour or doubts about the capacity of self or dependants to act. The ability of children and elderly people to act decisively and sensibly both before, during and after a bushfire provided they are given the right conceptual tools to work with is a fact well known by those with hands-on experience (see also, Towers, 2012; Towers, 2013; Australian Red Cross, 2011; Bedgood et al., 2009). This does not in any way imply that they should deliberately be placed in harm's way. Rather, workshop participants stressed the disempowering and risk enhancing consequence of well-meaning but overprotective 'parenting' of young and old.

The initiatives outlined in the textboxes demonstrate the localised but innovative ways in which gender-issues are challenged and gender vulnerability is mitigated by community engagement volunteers and staff despite the lack of structured and policy-specific institutional support.³

Conclusion

Emergency management agencies, including the NSW RFS, have good cause to be proud of many of the women and men who make up the ranks of volunteers and staff on whom Australia rely for assistance with bushfire mitigation, response and recovery. However, agencies also have much they can learn from and capitalise on in terms of the hard-won lessons and innovative ways in which gender roles and gendered norms are

tackled on-the-ground. These lessons both emphasise the need, and pave a way forward, for the gender-sensitive risk engagement policies and long-term institutional commitment that are required to enforce a 'culture change' of engagement.

The paper demonstrates how efforts to create a more gender-balanced and gender-sensitive environment for volunteers within the NSW RFS align squarely with efforts at engaging women in general with bushfire safety issues. They build on the core issues that are solidly embedded in the social structures of the communities served by the NSW RFS and whose residents make up the NSW RFS membership. These crosscutting issues materialise in the gender specific matters regularly encountered by fire agency staff and brigade volunteers. It arguably also results in heightened dimensions of gendered vulnerability to bushfire through many women's disengagement with or disbelief in their capacity to manage bushfire safety issues.

The three key pointers to more successful engagement highlighted in this paper – the benefits of hands-on experience and practice, the strength of networks, and the imperative of supportive learning environments – enable women to talk to women in a 'safe' everyday environment, allow women to absorb information through open discussion, involve and empower children and elderly people through active participation, and encourage women to take ownership of knowledge and thus a sense of capacity and responsibility. The pointers thus stress the importance of life cycles and how priorities change and vulnerability levels shift over time. They demonstrate that the crux of bushfire resilience lies in the ability of all household and family members to contribute to, communicate about, and share the responsibility of bushfire preparedness to the best of their individual abilities.

Ultimately, the transformation of successful individual initiatives, such as those highlighted in this paper, into state and countrywide phenomena requires long-term

political commitment within emergency services. Such long-term political commitment seems all the more pertinent with the frequency of recent tragic bushfires in Australia.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the NSW Rural Fire Service for supporting my research and allowing me to conduct the survey and workshops; and to the research participants for their time and invaluable contributions. Thank you also goes to the anonymous peer-reviewers for constructive comments. This paper is one aspect of a larger research project on bushfire resilience funded by the Australian Research Council (FL0992397).

NOTES

¹ While a statistically significant gender difference was recorded in perceptions of the language and attitude of local brigade members as intimidating, several cells had an expected count less than five and the result was therefore annulled.

² The NSW RFS AIDER Program (Assistance for Infirm Disabled and Elderly Residents) is a one-off free service, supporting vulnerable residents to live more safely and confidently in their home on bush fire prone land (www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/aider).

³ For other community outreach initiatives that challenge gender issues both in the lead up and aftermaths of bushfires in Australia see Filmer (2008; 2009), Delaine et al. (2008), SACFS (2010), Crown (2010), Geer (2012), Eriksen (In press), www.isiiad.com.au, www.weatherthestorm.net.au, www.whealth.com.au.

REFERENCES

Acker, J., 1991: Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations. In Lorber, J. & Farrell, S.A. (eds) *The Social Construction of Gender*. SAGE Publications, London, 162-179.

- 1 Agg, J., and Phillips, M., 1998: Neglected gender dimensions of rural social
- 2 restructuring. In Boyle, P. & Halfacree, K. (eds) *Migration into Rural Areas:*
- 3 *Theories and Issues*. John Wiley and Sons, Chichester, 252-279.
- 4 Allen, P.J., and Bennett, K., 2008: *SPSS for the health & behavioural sciences*,
- 5 Thomson, Australia.
- 6 Alston, M., 2005: Gender perspectives in Australian rural community life. In Cocklin,
- 7 C. & Dibden, J. (eds) *Sustainability and change in rural Australia*. University of
- 8 New South Wales, Sydney
- 9 Anderson, K., and Smith, S.J., 2001: Editorial: Emotional geographies. *Transactions of*
- 10 *the Institute of British Geographers*, 26, 7-10.
- 11 Australian Red Cross, 2011: After the emergency. Available at
- 12 <http://aftertheemergency.redcross.org.au/get-stories>
- 13 Bazeley, P., 2007: *Qualitative Data Analysis with NVivo*, Sage, London.
- 14 Beatson, R., and McLennan, J., 2005: Australia's women volunteer firefighters: A
- 15 literature review and research agenda. *Australian Journal on Volunteering*, 10,
- 16 18-27.
- 17 Beatson, R., McLennan, J., and Birch, A., 2008: Recruiting and Retaining Women Fire
- 18 Service Volunteers. *Fire Note*. Melbourne, Bushfire CRC & AFAC
- 19 Bedgood, J., Foster, A., Liddell, T., and Montague, S., 2009: Teenagers in emergencies.
- 20 Available at
- 21 [http://www.oesc.vic.gov.au/home/working+with+communities/oesc+-](http://www.oesc.vic.gov.au/home/working+with+communities/oesc+-+teenagers+in+emergencies)
- 22 [+teenagers+in+emergencies](http://www.oesc.vic.gov.au/home/working+with+communities/oesc+-+teenagers+in+emergencies)
- 23 Birch, A., McLennan, J., Beatson, R., and Kelly, L., 2008: Main Report: NSW Rural
- 24 Fire Service Volunteer Survey 2007. Melbourne, Bushfire CRC
- 25 Bryant, L., and Pini, B., 2010: *Gender and Rurality*, Routledge, New York.
- 26 Bryman, A., 2008: *Social Research Methods*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- 27 Childs, M., Morris, M., and Ingham, V., 2004: The rise and rise of clean, white-collar
- 28 (fire-fighting) work. *Disaster Prevention and Management: An International*
- 29 *Journal*, 13, 409-414.
- 30 Connell, R.W., 2008: A Thousand Miles from Kind: Men, Masculinities and Modern
- 31 Institutions. *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 16, 237-252.
- 32 Connell, R.W., 2005: *Masculinities*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- 33 Connell, R.W., and Messerschmidt, J.W., 2005: Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking
- 34 the Concept. *Gender & Society*, 19, 829-859.
- 35 Cornwall, A., 2007: Revisiting the 'Gender Agenda'. *IDS Bulletin*, 38, 69-78.
- 36 Crown, F., 2010: Womens Fire Awareness Program. *NSW RFS Engagement Matters E-*
- 37 *Newsletter*. Sydney, NSW Rural Fire Service
- 38 Delaine, D., Pedler, T., Probert, J., Goodman, H., and Rowe, C., 2008: Fiery Women:
- 39 Consulting, designing, delivering and evaluating pilot women's bushfire safety
- 40 skills workshop. *The International Bushfire Research Conference*. Adelaide,
- 41 Bushfire CRC, AFAC
- 42 Desmond, M., 2007: *On the Fireline: Living and Dying with Wildland Firefighters*, The
- 43 University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- 44 Eade, D., 1999: *Development with Women*. Oxfam, Oxford
- 45 Enarson, E., 2012: *Women Confronting Natural Disaster: From Vulnerability to*
- 46 *Resilience*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., Boulder, Colorado.
- 47 Eriksen, C., In press: *Gender and Wildfire: Landscapes of Uncertainty*, Routledge, New
- 48 York. ISBN 978-0-415-50270-2.
- 49 Eriksen, C., and Gill, N., 2010: Bushfire and Everyday Life: Examining the Awareness-
- 50 Action 'Gap' in Changing Rural Landscapes. *Geoforum*, 41, 814-825.

- 1 Eriksen, C., Gill, N., and Head, L., 2010: The Gendered Dimensions of Bushfire in
2 Changing Rural Landscapes in Australia. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 26, 332-342.
- 3 Filmer, J., 2008: Fire Fighting for Non-Fire Fighting Women. *The Australian Journal of*
4 *Emergency Management*, Spring, 14-15.
- 5 Filmer, J., and Filmer, P., 2009: *Fire Fighting for Non Firefighting Women*, Clear
6 Range Enterprises, The Angle, NSW.
- 7 Fordham, M., 2004: Gendering Vulnerability Analysis: Towards a More Nuanced
8 Approach. In Bankoff, G., Frerks, G. & Hilhorst, D. (eds) *Mapping*
9 *Vulnerability: Disasters, Development & People*. Earthscan, London
- 10 Geer, C., 2012: Then the Wind Changed: One Small Community's Difficult but
11 Inspiring Recovery from a Devastating Australian Firestorm. Brunswick, VIC,
12 Rebel Films Production
- 13 Klenke, K., 2011: *Women in Leadership: Contextual Dynamics and Boundaries*,
14 Emerald Group Publishing Ltd, Bingley.
- 15 Liepens, R., 2000: Making man: the construction and representation of agriculture-
16 based masculinities in Australia and New Zealand. *Rural Sociology*, 65, 605-
17 620.
- 18 Little, J., 2002: Rural geography: rural gender identity and the performance of
19 masculinity and femininity in the countryside. *Progress in Human Geography*,
20 26, 665-670.
- 21 Maleta, Y., 2009: Playing with fire: Gender at work and the Australian female cultural
22 experience within rural fire fighting. *Journal of Sociology*, 45, 291-306.
- 23 McLennan, J., and Birch, A., 2005: A potential crisis in wildfire emergency response
24 capability? Australia's volunteer firefighters. *Global Environmental Change*
25 *Part B: Environmental Hazards*, 6, 101-107.
- 26 Mishra, P., 2009: Let's Share the Stage: Inclusion of Men in Gender Risk Reduction. In
27 Enarson, E. & Dhar Chakrabarti, P.G. (eds) *Women, Gender, and Disaster*. Sage,
28 New Delhi
- 29 NSW Rural Fire Service, 2011: Making a Difference: Women in the NSW Rural Fire
30 Service. Sydney, State of New South Wales
- 31 Prior, T., and Eriksen, C., 2012: What does being "well prepared" for wildfire mean? In
32 Paton, D. & Tedim, F. (eds) *Wildfire and Community: Facilitating Preparedness*
33 *and Resilience*. Charles C Thomas Publisher LTD, Springfield, IL
- 34 Proudley, M., 2008: Fire, families and decisions. *The Australian Journal of Emergency*
35 *Management*, 23, 37-43.
- 36 Rhodes, A., 2008: "Tell 'em they're dreamin'": Is 'Stay or Go' a good policy response to
37 the wildfire risk? *The International Bushfire Research Conference*. Adelaide,
38 Australia,
- 39 SACFS, 2010: *Basic Bushfire Skills for Women: Workshop Manual*, SA Country Fire
40 Service for Government of South Australia, Adelaide.
- 41 Towers, B., 2012: Children's knowledge of vulnerability and resilience to bushfires.
42 Unpublished doctoral thesis, School of Psychology, University of Tasmania,
43 Hobart.
- 44 Towers, B., 2013: Making a Bushfire Survival Plan? Involve Your Kids? Melbourne,
45 Bushfire CRC. Available at
46 [http://www.bushfirecrc.com/sites/default/files/managed/resource/involve_your_](http://www.bushfirecrc.com/sites/default/files/managed/resource/involve_your_kids_-_bushfire_survival_planning.pdf)
47 [kids_-_bushfire_survival_planning.pdf](http://www.bushfirecrc.com/sites/default/files/managed/resource/involve_your_kids_-_bushfire_survival_planning.pdf)
- 48 White, S.C., 2000: 'Did the Earth Move?' The Hazards of Bringing Men and
49 Masculinities into Gender and Development. *IDS Bulletin*, 31, 33-41.
- 50 Yarnal, C.M., Dowler, L., and Hutchinson, S., 2004: Don't let the bastards see you

Eriksen, C. (2014) Gendered risk engagement: Challenging the embedded vulnerability, social norms and power relations in conventional Australian bushfire education. *Geographical Research*, **52**(1), pp.23-33.

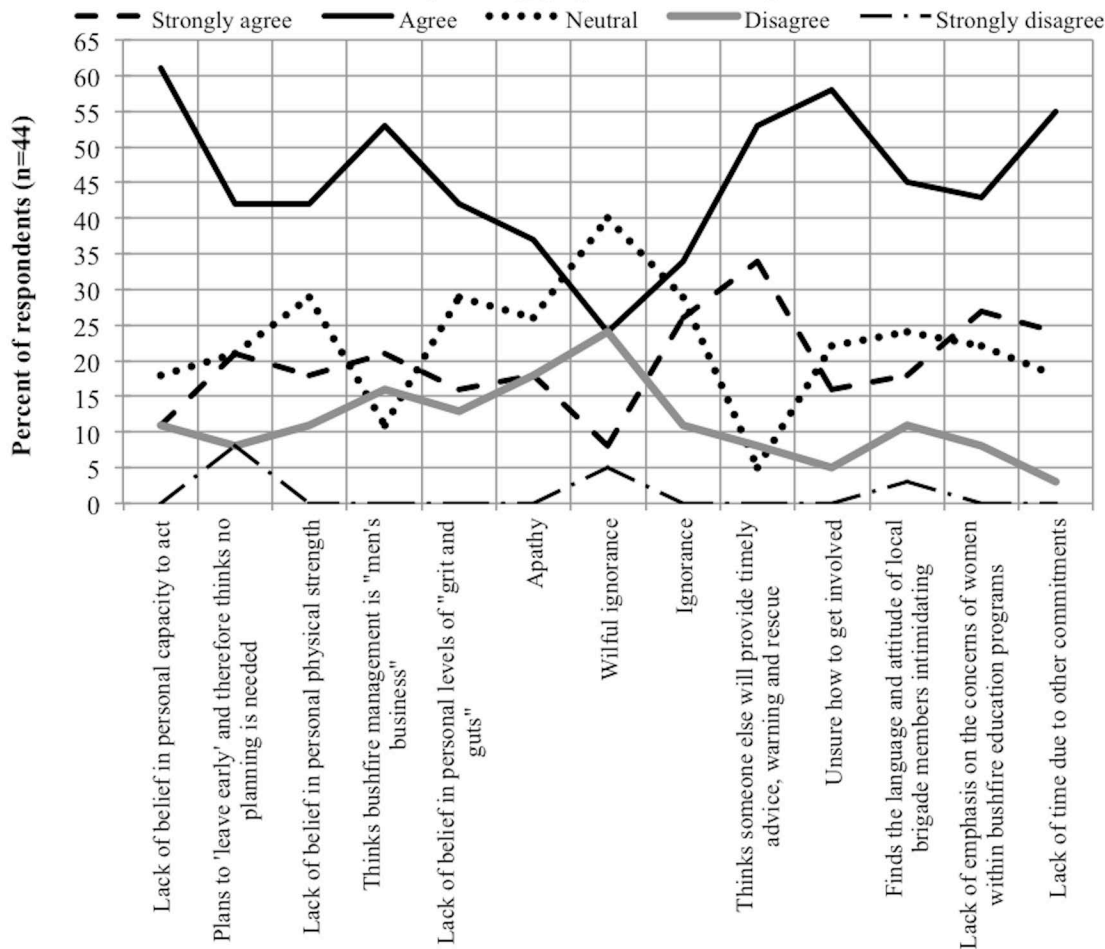
sweat: masculinity, public and private space, and the volunteer firehouse.
Environment and Planning A, 36, 685-699.

FIGURES

Figure 1. Perceived effectiveness of different outreach initiatives for engaging women with bushfire safety issues, by gender and rating average across genders.

Figure 2. Perceptions of factors that prevent women from engaging with bushfire safety issues.

Do you think any of the following prevent women from getting involved with bushfire planning, preparation and response?



How would you rate the effectiveness of these outreach initiatives for engaging women with bushfire safety issues?

